DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 183 022 FL 011 051

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TITLE On the Usage of "Ms".
PUB DATE 79
NOTE 19p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Females; *Feminism; Language Attitudes; Language Patterns; Language Research; *Language Usage; Males; *Sex Discrimination; *Sex Fairness; Sex Role; *Sex Stereotypes; Sociolinguistics; *Womens Studies

ABSTRACT

This paper is an overview of the introduction of "Ms." into language usage as part of the process of changing sexist language. Included are: (1) history of the term, (2) a discussion of the rationale for its introduction, (3) a report on the other suggested forms of address that do or do not specify sex and marital status, (4) a discussion of the various arguments against using Ms., and (5) the results of a brief survey of the actual usage patterns of Ms. in the late 1970s. Aspects of the misuse of Ms. are identified and analogies are drawn to name usage patterns that are also in flux. (Author)

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ED183022

On the Usage of Ms.

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July, 1979

U.S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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DISCOVERING SEXIST LANGUAGE

The oppression of women in language and by language has been a focus of debate in academia and the media throughout the 1970's. Four major books appeared in close succession during the mid-1970's: Robin Lakoff's (1975) Language and Woman's Place, Mary Ritchie Key's (1975) Male/Female Language, Casey Miller and Kate Swift's (1976) Words and Women, and Una Stannard's (1977) Mrs. Man. Indicative of the proliferation of writing on the topic are the various collections of articles and papers, e. g., Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley's (1975) Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance, Betty Lou Dubois and Isabel Crouch's (1978) The Sociology of the Languages of American Women , and a section with five papers on "Woman's Language" in Reza Ordoubadian and Walburga von Raffler Engel's (1975) Views on Language, and the various extensive bibliographies, e. g., Nancy Henley and Barrie Thorne's (1975) annotated bibliography, Mary Ritchie Key's (1975) comprehensive appendix, Norma J. Shepelak's (1977) bibliography on "generic language," and Maija S. Blaubergs and Marilyn Partridge Rieger's (1979) annotated bibliography on nonsexist language guidelines. I have previously categorized the various proposals for changing sexist language in terms of their underlying rationale and sometimes conflicting implementation strategies (Maija S. Blaubergs, 1978a] and have analyzed the various arguments against changing the sexist usage of masculine terms as generics (Maija S. Blaubergs, 1979).

This paper is an overview of another aspect of changing sexist language: the introduction of Ms. into language usage. I consider the history of the term as reported by others, the rationale for its introduction, the alternative terms that have been suggested to meet similar needs, the opposition to the introduction of the terms, and the current use and misuse of the term.

INTRODUCING MS.

Both Mary Ritchie Key (1975) and Casey Miller and Kate Swift (1976) have discussed in detail the early introduction of Ms. into the English language. Key notes that Ms. "occurred in secretarial handbooks decades ago." (p. 49) Miller and Swift contend that Ms. "has been around as a title of courtesy since at least the 1940s." (p. 97) Alma Graham (1975) has reported its first appearance in a dictionary, the 1972 American Heritage School Dictionary. She wrote the definition: "An abbreviation used as a title of courtesy before a woman's last name or before her given name and last name, whether she is married or not." (p. 60) In the first issue of Ms. magazine (Spring, 1972), the choice of the magazine's name is described as follows:

> Ms. is being adopted as a standard form of address by women who want to be recognized as individuals, rather than being identified by their relationship with a man....It's symbolic

> and important. There's a lot in a name. (What's a Ms.? 1972, p. 4]

In the same article, Bella Abzug's effort to prevent government agencies from using prefixes that indicate marital status, is described as the introduction of the "Ms. Bill."

WHY?

Why was Ms. needed? One could answer simply that sexism in language includes the existence of nonparallel expressions such as "the Mrs. vs. Miss distinction in comparison to the undifferentiated-by-marriage Mr." (Maija S. Blaubergs, 1974, p. 4) Similarly, Varda One (1971) points out the following "double standard" in "Manglish":

> Because there is no differentiating title for married and unmarried men, women cannot tell the marital status of men as easily as men can determine theirs. Some people have adopted Ms. (pronounced "miz") to mean either Miss or Mrs. as an equivalent form to Mr. (p. 3)

While the foregoing explanations of the need for Ms. focus on the sexism of the lack of parallelism in forms of address for women and men, the following quote more specifically addresses the implications of such lack of parallelism:

> The existence of two contractions for Mistress (Miss and Mrs.) and but one for Mister (Mr.) underscores the cultural concern and linguistic practice: women are defined in relationship

to men. (Laurel Walum, 1977, p. 19)

This argument is virtually identical to the arguments for a woman's retention of her birth name at marriage and for her right to pass on her name to her children. (Marija Matich Hughes, 1971; Una Stannard, 1977) In fact, the editors of Ms. have explained the necessary connection between Ms. and names as follows:

> In practice, Ms. is used with a woman's given name: Ms. Jane Jones, say, or Ms. Jane Wilson Jones. Obviously, it doesn't make sense to say Ms. John Jones: a woman identified only as her husband's wife must remain a Mrs. (What's a Ms.? 1972, p. 4)

However, the usage of Ms. is not seen as conflicting with the adoption of the husband's surname upon marriage. Thus, in effect, the introduction of Ms. to replace Mrs. and Miss would eliminate only one aspect of married women's definition in relationship to men.

Research conducted by Madeline E. Heilman (1975) has suggested another advantage of the title Ms. She found that both high school and college students rated potential courses as more enjoyable and more intellectually stimulating when the instructor was presented as Ms. rather than Miss or Mrs. The ratings for Ms. were virtually identical to those for Mr.

In brief, introducing Ms. would eliminate a sexist aspect of language

and perhaps reduce other forms of sexism that derive from women's definition in relationship to men.

THE ALTERNATIVES

There have been a number of attempts to introduce distinctions in the forms of address for men according to their marital status rather than to eliminate the distinction for women. These typically have not been perceived as or intended to be serious suggestions. Mary Ritchie Key (1975) has reported the early suggestion of Mush (abbreviated Mh.) to refer to unmarried men as well as the suggestions of Br. or Bch. (for bachelor) that were coined in response to a suggestion of Mark (abbreviated Mk.) that was described as meaning "a mark worth shooting at." (p. 52) More recent suggestions have been reported by Casey Miller and Kate Swift (1976): Bar for bachelors and Wow for widowers; Murm (abbreviated Mrm.) and Smur (abbreviated Smr.) for married and unmarried men, respectively.

There have also been at least two suggestions for titles that are not differentiated by marital status or sex. One is Person (abbreviated Pn.); the other is described as follows by Bobbye Sorrels Persing (1978):

> Some revisionists urge that sex-identifying courtesy titles be eliminated and "M." (pronounced "em") be used. However, the chance for sweeping acceptance of "M." is small. Therefore, "Ms." is the immediate solution. Use "M." as an alternative,

> however--particularly when the sex of the receiver is not known. (p. 19)

THE DEBATE

The debate centers around the alleged unique importance of marital status for women. Robin Lakoff (1975) has responded at length to the proposal for titles that indicate the marital status of men:

> At almost every turn, because of the way social and business events are arranged, one needs to know a woman's marital status, and the position held by her husband. But one does not need the same information about a man, since his social status can be gauged, generally, purely by reference to his own accomplishments. (p. 41)

Thus, while a feminist perspective points to the need for parallel forms of address for women and men, whether the change be to introduce new distinctions for men or to remove old distinctions for women, one response to changing this aspect of sexist language has been an emphasis of the continuing need for sexist terminology to reflect existing sexist practices in society. Lakoff makes this point over and over again in different words, e. g., "The change to Ms. will not be generally adopted until a woman's status in society changes to assure her an identity based on her own accomplishments" (p. 41); "women must achieve some measure of greater social independence of men before Ms. can gain wider acceptance" (p. 42); and "the attempt to do away with Miss and Mrs. is doomed to

failure if it is not accompanied by a change in society's attitude to what the titles describe." (p. 42)

On the other hand, Shirley Davy (1978) contends that "The introduction of Ms into a world-view that was still largely patriarchal constituted a profound disruption" (p. 47) and that each time Ms. is used "the women's movement has achieved an important victory." (p. 48) She further describes the use of Ms. as "the means by which women may publicly declare themselves as mainstream human beings" (p. 48) in contrast to Lakoff's (1975) declaration that

> Since a significant part of the opinion one normally forms about a woman's character and social station depends on her marital status--as is not the case with men--it is obvious that the title of address should supply this information in the case of women, but not of men. (pp. 40-41)

Davy contends that individuals are changing society, while Lakoff maintains that individuals must comply to societal realities. Bobbye Sorrels Persing (1978) has synthesized these two viewpoints as follows:

> (A)s soon as a significant number of women accept the responsibility to refuse to announce marital status (as is done through the use of "Miss" and "Mrs.")...the outdated forms can be abandoned. And, depending upon the definition of "significant," that day is closer than insensitive tradition-

alists are willing to acknowledge. (p. 25)

Thus, like for other aspects of sexist language, one can argue that all language change should be indirect, i. e., follow societal change, or that active idiolectal change by part of the population can result in widespread language change and (possibly) accompanying societal change.

THE RESISTANCE

The resistance to the usage of Ms. has several variations. One argument has been that Ms. is not a true abbreviation like Miss, Mrs. and Mr. However, Alma Graham (1975) reports that Ms. is derived from mistress, just as Miss and Mrs. were. This argument is related to the "word-etymology" argument (Maija S. Blaubergs, 1978ab, 1979) against changing sexist language that specifies that a word correctly means what it once did. In the case of Miss, this was once a young girl, while Mrs. referred to women whether married or not. (Miller and Swift, 1976). Thus, Ms. could be construed as unnecessary, and the former meaning of Mrs. could be revived. This has actually occurred in some other languages, e. g., Hughes (1971) has reported the passing of legislation in Austria that requires all women government employees to be addressed as "Frau" (Mrs.). However, the opponents of the use of Ms. have not carried the "word-etymology" argument to its logical conclusion; they have simply questioned the origin of the word. Closely related to the "word-etymology" argument is the "appeal to authority"

argument. This argument has been commonly applied to the use of Ms. The authorities have included governors and etiquette consultants. Miller and Swift (1976) reported a memo sent by the governor of New Hampshire to all secretaries employed by the state in which he ordered that "The practice of using Ms. instead of Miss or Mrs. is to be discontinued immediately." (p. 100) In a question-and-answer etiquette column, Elizabeth Post (1979) was asked about the use of the form Mrs. Mary Jones by a reader who had been criticized for using it on her return address labels. Post's reply was that such usage clearly implied that the woman was divorced; that if she wanted to use her own first name, she should use the form Mary Jones and that if she wanted her marital status to be clear, she should include a second line reading Mrs. John Jones. No mention of Ms. as a possible title occurred. Jean Ward (1975) reports conflicts in the adoption of Ms. in the news media: "'Ms.' is used in wire service stories, confounding those local editors who have banned it from their newsrooms." (p. 700) Thus, although dictionaries are increasingly including Ms. as an entry, other appeals to authority are attempting to block its usage.

The argument that "change is too difficult, confusing, inconvenient, impractical or whatever" has also occurred in response to Ms. The characterizations have included "ugly" and "cumbersome," e. g., "The pronunciation of 'Ms.' has received unkind attacks by some who hear it as a very ugly combination" (Key, 1975, p. 50); "The arguments that it cannot

be pronounced, that it has an ugly sound...are often offered with a vehemence not justified by their merit" (Miller and Swift, 1976, p. 97); and "The term was cumbersome to use in direct speech." (Davy, 1978, p. 47) Concerning Ms., most of the difficulty that has been reported has concerned its pronunciation. Alma Graham (1975) reported the sequence of events leading to the inclusion of Ms. in the American Heritage School Dictionary as follows:

> (A) problem arose over its pronunciation: it was an abbreviation that anyone could write but that no one could say. Arguments over "miz" or "mis" or "em es" continued through the summer. Then, in October,...our usage editor, urged that we enter Ms. in the dictionary as an abbreviation whether or not the title could be pronounced with ease. (p. 60)

A final argument against the use of Ms. has been a version of the "freedom of speech/unjustified coercion" argument: that the use of Ms. must not be forced upon anyone. Repeatedly, one sees the following kind of criterion concerning the usage of Ms.: Persing's (1978) stopgap measure of "using 'Miss' or 'Mrs.' and the husband's name for married women only for women who so specify, and using 'Ms.' for all other women." (p. 19) However, on the other hand, women who expressly make known their preference to be addressed as Ms. may not be granted their wish. Casey Miller and Kate Swift (1976) report the following forceful use of Mrs.:

"Having reported that Billie Jean King prefers to be known as Ms. King, the Times continued to call her Mrs. King." (p. 101) In fact, women have been denied the right to vote for refusing to specify a Miss or Mrs. title (Hughes, 1971; Stannard, 1977) just as Lucy Stone was once denied the right to vote for refusing to use her husband's name. It appears that the use of Miss and Mrs. against women's wishes has been far more forceful than the use of Ms. against women's wishes. Barbara Bate (1976) has reported the following response of a male university faculty member to the use of Ms.: "I think I have a right to know whether or not she's a Miss or Mrs." (p. 10) However, as I report in the section on usage, it appears that Ms. is more often than not just an option for women along with Miss and Mrs. It is not yet a parallel form to Mr. and the resistance to its use, however motivated, is continuing.

THE USAGE

To what extent has Ms. entered the language and what is the pattern of its usage? In a survey of female and male faculty members concerning new usage, Barbara Bate (1976) found that 16 of the 20 individuals whom she interviewed found both Ms. and Mrs. acceptable and almost as many (15) found Miss acceptable. Thus, there is a hint in these findings, that although Ms. is entering the language, it is not doing so as the parallel form to address to Mr., but rather as an alternative to Miss and/or Mrs. The intent of the introduction of Ms. may well be being misunderstood, just

as the intent of the introduction of chairperson has been misunderstood (Maija S. Blaubergs, 1974; Sharon R. Veach, 1978). In a recent overview of the misunderstandings and misapplications involved in the change towards nonsexist language (Blaubergs, 1978b), I reported the usage of Ms. in a number of magazines published in the Summer of 1978. In the study, I examined the form of address used in coupons and postcards that were to be returned to advertisers. A number of writers have suggested that advertising readily incorporates changing usage patterns. Mary Ritchie Key (1975) mentions the early use of Ms. by "junk mail" advertisers, while Casey Miller and Kate Swift (1976) actually attribute the increased usage of Ms. to "the growth of direct mail selling (which) made the abbreviation an effective time and money saver." (p. 97) Bobbye Sorrels Persing (1978) specifically addresses the writers of forms and coupons with the following advice for nonsexist communication:

> (I)f a writer is responsible for designing forms or coupons on which names are to be supplied, he or she should list only "Mr," and "Ms." as the courtesy titles to be encircled by the respondents--or list no courtesy titles at all. (p. 25)

Thus, a good indicator of the usage patterns for Ms. may well be the usage on such forms and coupons. Interestingly, the final recommendation of Persing seems to have been the one followed by the advertisers that I surveyed. Of a total of 224 forms in 8 different magazines, 192 or

85.7% simply specified "Name." Of those forms that specified titles, 69% included Ms. as one of the options. However, the parallel titles of Mr. and Ms. occurred in only 41% of the forms which included Ms. as an option. In another 41% of the forms, Ms. occurred along with Miss and Mrs. while in the remaining 18%, Ms. appeared in lieu of Miss. Apparently, then, Ms. in current usage is being treated either as the replacement or abbreviation for Miss or as a third alternative form of address for women. Three of the same magazines were again surveyed in the Summer of 1979. The three magazines selected have been classified as representative of three different types of magazines for women by Sheila J. Silver (1976): Redbook as "General Interest"; Cosmopolitan as "Young Modern"; and Ms. as "Vanguard." Again, the forms and coupons to be returned to advertisers were tabulated for the specification of titles. The June 1979 issues of the magazines provided the data base. Of a total of 94 forms, 84 or 89% did not specify any title. Of those that specified titles, 60% included Ms. as one of the options. The parallel usage of Mr. and Ms. (always in that order) occurred in 33% of the forms that included Ms. while in 50% of such forms, Ms. occurred along with Miss and Mrs. Again, there was some usage of Ms. as the replacement of Miss: in 17% of the forms including Ms. Both Ms. and Mrs. appeared in all three magazines, while Miss did not occur only in Ms. magazine. Overall, the patterns of usage were highly similar in both years. It appears that usage is still in a state of co-existence

of old and new forms. It will be interesting to see if future usage will be the abolition of all titles, titles based on marital status and/or sex, or a long period of continued inconsistency.

OVERVIEW

The problems in the introduction of Ms. in parallel usage to Mr. have included the misconceptions that Ms. is to be used 1) only in reference to women who so insist; 2) only in reference to women whose marital status in unknown; 3) only in reference to unmarried women (as a replacement for Miss); 4) only in reference to those unmarried women who wish to hide their unmarried status; 5) only in reference to married women if they wish to hide their unhappy marriages; 6) only as a label for feminists. In other words, all of the above usages suggest that Ms. is to be an alternative only for a select subset of women, unlike Mr. which traditionally has been used for all men except those unworthy of such a courtesy title. More detailed discussions of the various misunderstandings concerning the use of Ms. may be found in several of the references previously cited, e. g., Shirley Davy (1978) and Laurel Walum (1977).

The status of Ms. is closely tied to other phenomena concerning the role of marital status in women's lives. Women are increasingly keeping or reverting to their birth names regardless of marital status (Blaubergs, in preparation). Both women's name usage and the usage of titles are in a state of flux, but as Una Stannard (1977) has thoroughly documented, the issues in the labelling of women relative to their husbands have been variously addressed long before the 1970's only to surface again.

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